A Shot That Changed History: The Killing of British Major Best by Utman Khel

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Abstract:

Malakand, a mountainous region in the north of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, serves as a historical gateway between the Peshawar Valley and the valleys of Swat and Dir. Known for its strategic importance, Malakand has witnessed many key military and cultural events throughout history. It has long been home to proud Pashtun tribes who fiercely guarded their freedom and traditions against foreign rule. Among these tribes, the Utman Khel (Karlani Pashtunes) stand out as one of the most resilient and valorous. They inhabit areas between Bajaur, Dir, and Malakand, known for their strong sense of honor, unity, and defiance against oppression. Historically, the Utman Khel resisted both the Mughal Empire and later the British colonial forces. Their mountainous homeland gave them a tactical advantage, and their unwavering faith and tribal code of Pashtunwali made them unyielding defenders of their land. During the British colonial era, tensions between local tribes and the administration often turned violent due to injustices and interference in tribal matters. One such incident occurred in the village of Agra in Malakand Agency (1935), when Major Leslie William Hazlett Best, the British Political Agent, launched a punitive attack following a local dispute. In defense of his people, Ghazi Muhammad Utman Khel Baba of Shamozi targeted and killed Major Best with a sniper shot. The retaliation was severe, British aircraft bombed Agra village, but Ghazi Baba’s act became a symbol of resistance and sacrifice in Utman Khel history.

1. Malakand – The Mountain Gateway of History

Malakand, nestled between the valleys of Swat and the plains of Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, is a region steeped in both beauty and blood. Its rugged hills, winding rivers, and strategic passes have long made it a gateway to the northern valleys and a crossroads of empires. From Alexander the Great to

the British Raj, every power that ventured into the frontier had to face the fierce independence of the Pashtun tribes who called Malakand home.

The Malakand Pass, in particular, holds deep historical importance. It has been the site of several major military expeditions, including the Malakand Campaign of 1897, where a young Winston Churchill, then a British officer and war correspondent, first witnessed the unyielding courage of the Pashtuns. Yet beyond these famous battles, countless untold stories of resistance, honor, and sacrifice remain etched into the soil of Malakand. Among them, the story of Ghazi Muhammad Utman Khel Baba and Major Leslie William Hazlett Best stands as one of the most poignant.

2. The Utman Khel – Proud Guardians of the Frontier

The Utman Khel tribe, descendants of the Karlanri branch of the Pashtuns, inhabit the hilly tracts stretching across Bajaur, Dir, and Malakand. Their homeland lies at the meeting point of mountain and plain, a land of stark beauty and strategic importance. The Utman Khel have long been renowned for their independence, bravery, and deep attachment to their ancestral code of Pashtunwali, which emphasizes honor (nang), hospitality (melmastia), and revenge (badal).

Historically, the Utman Khel have been known for their unity and resistance to domination. During the Mughal era, they were among the first tribes to rise against imperial encroachment, and in the colonial period, they stood firm against the British expansion into their lands. The rugged terrain of their homeland served as a natural fortress, and their communal spirit turned every village into a citadel of defiance.

Socially, the Utman Khel were self-governing, led by village maliks and tribal jirgas rather than foreign administrators. Their economy revolved around agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade, but above all, their cultural wealth lay in their traditions of courage, poetry, and faith. In the oral histories of Malakand, the name of Utman Khel Baba still echoes as a symbol of devotion to the cause of freedom and dignity.

3. British Intrusion and the Seeds of Conflict

When the British extended their control into the frontier in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they attempted to impose administrative order through the establishment of the Malakand Agency. A Political Agent, representing the colonial government, was placed in charge of the region, tasked with maintaining peace and enforcing British authority among the fiercely independent tribes.

Major Leslie William Hazlett Best, who served as Political Agent from 1933 to 1935, was one such official. To secure British influence, he established Levy Force posts in the villages of Kot and Agra, in the heart of Malakand. However, beneath the surface, resentment brewed among the local people. The British presence, their disregard for tribal customs, and their repeated military raids created an atmosphere of tension and distrust.

The spark that ignited the conflict came from an incident in Dhery village. According to oral accounts, a young man named Sher Malik’s son, from Dhery, and a Hindu girl fell in love and fled together to Agra village, seeking refuge. When the girl’s family complained to the British authorities, accusing the boy of abduction, Major Best ordered the elders of Agra to surrender the couple. Bound by tribal honor and the sanctity of refuge, a sacred principle of Pashtunwali, the elders refused.

Enraged by the defiance, Major Best mobilized the Malakand Levy Force and launched an assault on Agra. The neighboring villages of Toti, Selipat, and Kot joined in defense of their fellow tribesmen. Warriors from across the hills gathered, while Faqir Ul-Umrah, a spiritual leader from Afghanistan, is said to have crossed into the region to support the resistance. What began as a local dispute quickly escalated into a full-fledged confrontation between the colonizers and the people of Malakand.

4. The Death of Major Best and the Heroism of Ghazi Muhammad Baba

As the battle raged near Agra, the British forces advanced under Major Best’s command. In the midst of the fighting, a skilled marksman, Ghazi Muhammad Utman Khel Baba from Shamozi, took aim from the surrounding heights. With a single, precise shot, he struck Major Best, killing him instantly.

The death of the Political Agent sent shockwaves through the colonial administration. The British forces, in retaliation, bombed Agra village from the air, a rare and devastating act for that era. Several villagers were killed, homes were destroyed, and the community faced immense pressure to surrender. Eventually, the elders of Agra, seeking to protect their people, handed over the couple. The Hindu girl was returned to her family, while Sher Malik’s son was imprisoned.

Major Best’s body was carried first to Hariankot, then to Peshawar, where he was buried in the European Cemetery. Meanwhile, Ghazi Muhammad Utman Khel Baba’s name became immortal among his people, a symbol of resistance against foreign rule and of the defense of Pashtun honor. His grave, still revered today, lies in the same soil for which he fought.

Figure 1. Grave of Major Hazlett Best.

Figure 2. Grave of Ghazi Muhammad Baba.

5. Two Graves, One Path, One History

The graves of Major Hazlett Best (Figure 1) and Ghazi Muhammad Baba (Figure 2)tell a single, intertwined story, one of empire and resistance, of two men who met on opposite sides of history. One came as an agent of colonial order; the other rose as a guardian of tribal freedom. Their story, though born in conflict, reflects the enduring spirit of Malakand, its love of independence, its fierce defense of dignity, and its unbroken link to the past.

In the end, both men rest beneath the same sky, their paths forever bound by the mountains of Malakand, a land that remembers every act of courage, and every price paid for freedom.

6. Conclusions

The story of Major Hazlett Best and Ghazi Muhammad Utman Khel Baba is not merely an episode of violence; it is a mirror reflecting the complex encounter between empire and freedom, duty and faith. Their intertwined fates remind us that history is not written only in official reports, but also in the silent stones of graves and the memories of people. In Malakand, where mountains guard centuries of struggle, such stories remain alive in the hearts of its tribes. They speak of a timeless truth, that foreign power may rule by force, but the spirit of the land and its people can never be conquered

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